NASIS

NEBRASKA ANNUAL SOCIAL INDICATORS SURVEY

Bureau of Sociological Research
Department of Sociology
University of Nebraska–Lincoln
Lincoln, Nebraska 68588-0325
Telephone: (402) 472-3672

FALL NASIS 1986, #2

NEBRASKAN'S VIEWS ON CURRENT ISSUES

FACING THE STATE

Alan Booth
Department of Sociology

Released February 1987

Price: $ .75

The Nebraska Annual Social Indicators Survey

David R. Johnson and Alan Booth, 1986 Study Co-Directors

The findings in this report are based on data collected in the eleventh Nebraska Annual Social Indicators Survey (NASIS). This survey is part of an on-going study of the quality of life in Nebraska conducted by the Bureau of Sociological Research at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

In the Fall of 1986, a representative sample of 1,870 Nebraskans eighteen years of age or older living in households was interviewed by telephone. Approximately 60% of those interviewed were drawn from a sample of respondents who had previously been interviewed in earlier years of the study. These panel respondents were last interviewed in the Spring of 1985. The remainder of the sample was selected using a random digit telephone sampling design. The interview averages approximately 40 minutes and includes questions about health, housing, work, family life, education, recreation, political interests, and other items reflecting quality of life in the state. For the entire sample, 95 out of 100 times the percentages computed from the items asked on the survey are likely to be accurate to within plus or minus 2.257 percent of the figure that would have been obtained if each adult in Nebraska had been surveyed. This is an estimate of maximum error and for most items the percentages are likely to be even more accurate.

The data gathered by NASIS are used by a wide variety of state and local government agencies for policy and program planning and by faculty and students at the University of Nebraska and other colleges for research. No information identifying any respondent is released to any users and the strict confidentiality of individual respondents is rigidly enforced. While the final responsibility for the organization and structure of the survey and for reports produced under its name rests with the Bureau of Sociological Research, public agencies and university departments play an integral part in planning the survey through an Advisory Committee. Public organizations interested in membership on the Advisory Committee should contact the NASIS Study Directors.

Funding for NASIS comes from the University of Nebraska, the Bureau of Sociological Research, and state and local agencies which buy items and data analysis from the survey.

The NASIS surveys are repeated each year to measure change in the quality of life in Nebraska. While there is a core of questions which is included every year, each survey has a large component of unique items which address specific topical areas. Plans for future years include interviewing a new sample of Nebraskans in the Fall of 1987. Additional details on the NASIS surveys regarding use of the survey data or cost of purchasing items on future surveys can be obtained by contacting David R. Johnson or Alan Booth, NASIS Study Directors, at the Bureau of Sociological Research or by sending for a copy of the 1987 NASIS Prospectus.

NEBRASKAN'S VIEWS ON CURRENT ISSUES FACING THE STATE

As part of the Nebraska Annual Social Indicators Survey conducted in the fall of 1986, 923 adults were asked about their views regarding: caps on liability settlements; methods of achieving economic development; radioactive waste in Nebraska; water quality legislation; services to keep the elderly independent; and drug testing employees. Telephone interviews with a randomly selected sample of people were conducted in October and November. The sampling error is + or - three percentage points.

The selection of topics and questions was based on advice from the staff of the Legislative Research Office, Policy Research Office, and other observers of problems facing state and local government. The final selection of topics and questions was the decision of the Executive Committee of the Bureau of Sociological Research and the Codirectors of that organization.

NEBRASKAN'S FAVOR MORE REGULATION OF LIABILITY CASES

Fifty-six percent of those polled favored a law that would restrict damage settlements. Respondents were asked: "Recently liability insurance rates have increased greatly. One of the reasons for the increase may be the large claims insurance companies have to pay. Do you favor or oppose a law that would restrict damage settlements to coverage of direct medical expenses and loss of income? Such a law would eliminate awards to cover mental distress, pain or suffering." Fifty-six percent favored such legislation, 28% were opposed, and 16% were undecided about the issue.

Respondents were then asked: "Do you favor or oppose regulations that would limit the profits insurance companies can derive from selling and servicing liability insurance policies?" An even greater majority (64%) favored such limitations. Twenty-two percent were opposed and 14% were uncertain.

Finally, respondents were asked: "Do you favor or oppose regulations that would limit the fees lawyers can charge." Limitations were favored by 77%, opposed by 19%, and 4% were unsure.

Voters (people who had voted within the last two years) were compared with nonvoters and there were no significant differences in the response patterns. There appears to be a broad base of support for the idea that the judicial system has been making awards that are too high and that limits need to be placed on the system responsible for those awards.

NEBRASKANS HAVE MIXED VIEWS ON ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

With the depressed agriculture industry, economic development has been a central issue in election campaigns as well as in legislative and policy initiatives. Everyone is in favor of economic development, but people are uncertain how to do it or fund it. Survey respondents were asked: "Lately there has been a lot of talk about economic development in Nebraska. Economic development can include programs to stimulate local business and programs to attract new businesses to locate in Nebraska. Which do you think would be more effective -- helping businesses which are already here to grow, or attracting new business to the state?" More than a third of the sample (35%) favored both. Thirty-seven percent favored attracting new businesses and 27% liked the idea of helping local business. Only 1% favored some other option. The differerences in preferences are too small to take seriously; clearly a dual approach is favored.

While there was considerable support for using tax dollars to support economic development, a narrow majority opposed using public funds for this purpose. The question was: "One way to encourage economic development is to give tax breaks to new or expanding businesses. Would you be willing to have a slight increase in your property, income, or sales tax to do this?" Forty-seven percent favored the use of tax funds, but 53% did not. There are, however, some important occupational and regional variations in the responses to this question. For example, the majority (56%) of professionals, managers, and sales people favored a tax increase while clerical, skilled, service, and other occupations did not (40%). Also, the majority (52%) of those in the southeastern part of the state favored a tax increase while those in other areas (perhaps more economically depressed areas) did not (40%).

A similar question was asked about stimulating local business: "Would you be willing to have a slight increase in your taxes to fund other types of economic development programs?" Forty-five percent were willing to use tax sources, but the majority (55%) were not. Responses to this question did not differ by occupation or region of the state.

NEBRASKANS STRONGLY OPPOSE STATE AS SITE FOR NUCLEAR WASTE BUT BELIEVE LOCAL ATOMIC POWER PLANTS SAFE

While there is little support for establishing sites for disposing of radioactive waste and strong support for more regulations on transporting such waste across the state, Nebraskans believe the atomic power plants in the area are safe. Survey participants were asked: "Nebraska is being considered as a regional disposal site for low-level radioactive waste. Some feel that this would mean additional business for Nebraska. Would you favor or oppose having isolated locations in the state serve as disposal sites for low-level radioactive waste?" Seventy-one percent oppose locating radioactive disposals in the state and 23% favor it. Only 6% were uncertain about their views on this issue.

Not surprisingly, people were even more opposed to Nebraska as a site for high-level radioactive waste. They were asked: "Would you favor or oppose a regional disposal site for high-level radioactive waste?" Eighty-six percent were opposed, 8% in favor, and 6% undecided.

People's concern extends to the shipment of radioactive waste through the state. "What about trains that go through Nebraska carrying radioactive waste. Do you feel the regulations on them need to be more strict, less strict, or are they just about right?" was the question asked. Nearly half (49%) believed the regulations need to be more strict, while 50% felt they were about right. Only 1% favored weaker regulations.

Finally, we asked about their concerns about atomic power plants in the state. The questions were asked following the atomic power plant disaster in the Soviet Union. The question was: "How about the nuclear power plants located in Nebraska. Are they safe or do you feel they should be phased out of operation?" The majority (63%) thought they were safe and only 13% felt they should be phased out. However, 24% were uncertain about the matter -- perhaps concerned whether a disaster could occur in Nebraska.

It appears there would be a stiff fight to establish a disposal site in Nebraska and that people are ready to support tougher regulations regarding the transportation of nuclear wastes across the state.

NEBRASKANS FAVOR IMMEDIATE GOVERNMENT ACTION ON WATER QUALITY PROBLEMS

In recent years there has been a good deal of concern about water quality. The majority of Nebraskans believe it is a moderate to serious problem that requires immediate attention. Those most concerned would be willing to support a tax increase to deal with the problem.

The first question asked was: "Do you think there may be man-made chemicals in the drinking water which could affect your health?" A large majority (77%) believed there were potentially dangerous chemicals in the water. To get some idea about the seriousness of the problem respondents were asked: "Do you think this is a serious problem, a moderately serious problem, or a problem that is not too serious?" Thirty-nine percent said it was a serious problem and 37% said it was a moderately serious problem. Only 24% believed it was not serious. Residents of the southeastern portion of the state were more likely to select the not too serious category (28%) than the rest of the state (18%). Perhaps urban residents do not have as much direct exposure to the problem as people in small communities and rural areas.

To get at people's views on when something should be done about it, respondents were asked: "Is this a problem the government should deal with now, do something about in the next two years, or let it wait for several years?" A significant majority (76%) wanted something done now, 19% said they wanted action within the next two years, but only 5% felt it could wait.

Those who felt it was a problem requiring immediate action were asked: "Would you be willing to pay a slight tax increase to have the government do more work on the problem?" Seventy-five percent favored the tax increase to solve the problem.

Voters did not differ from nonvoters on the water quality questions.

NEBRASKANS FAVOR TAX INCREASE TO MEET THE NEEDS OF THE ELDERLY

In a period when tax cuts seem to have widespread acceptance, it is a surprise when tax increases are favored. This seems to be the case for services to the elderly.

Respondents were asked: "There are many services that keep elderly people in their own houses, such as meals brought to the home, people who come in to help with the housekeeping, and so on. The number of older persons in Nebraska is increasing each year. Would you favor or oppose a tax increase to meet the needs of these older people?" Sixty-eight percent favored a tax increase, 23 percent were opposed, and nine percent were undecided. Voters favored it slightly less (66 percent) than non voters (76 percent).

It appears special programs to keep elderly independent has a broad base of support in the State.

NEBRASKANS FAVOR DRUG TESTING

In a time when public concern about drug abuse is high it is not unusual to see these concerns reflected in calls for action. In spite of concerns about people's rights to privacy, a majority favor drug testing.

Survey respondents were asked: "Should the law allow employers to require employees to be tested for drugs?" Sixty-seven percent said yes, 18 percent opposed such measures, and 15 percent qualified their answer to indicate that drug testing should be allowed only for some jobs.

When asked: "Should State employees be required to take drug tests?", 71 percent said yes, 17 percent did not favor testing, and 12 percent qualified their answer indicating testing should only be required for some jobs.

There appears to be strong support for legislation that permits employers to test for drugs.

List of reports already released using data gathered in the 1986 Fall Nebraska Annual Social Indicators Survey. These may be purchased at the indicated price from the Bureau of Sociological Research at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

Report Number	Title
1	Designs, Procedures, Instruments, and Forms for the 1986 Fall NASIS. David R. Johnson. Price: $7.50.